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ABSTRACT

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The sexually assaulted female: innocent victim or temptress?

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Abstract

The Toronto Transit Commission employees were on strike for 23 days, producing a total shut-down of all public transportation and a resulting increase in the number of hitch-hiking females. The strike provided a novel and unique opportunity to empirically examine two theories of sexual assault and to evaluate the effects of hitch-hiking upon sexual offences.

During the strike the number of sexual offences against hitch-hiking females increased nine times ($p < .001$) and accounted for 12.86% of all sexual offences as compared to 1.59% during the Pre-Strike and 0% during the Post-Strike periods. The total number of sexual offences was unaffected by the strike. The results disconfirm the theory that sexual offences are victim-provoked, and support the theory that the female victim is not responsible for the offence. Five preventative measures were proposed to reduce the incidence and severity of sexual offences.

Introduction

Among the various forms of pathological behaviour, sexual offences are considered to be some of the most abhorrent to society. Whether one adopts an analytical orientation or behavioural approach towards sexual offences, it is equally important to try to delineate the factors which precipitate or reinforce the offensive sexual behaviour. The benefit derived from determining the etiology of sexual offences allows society to take steps towards reducing or preventing the incidence of these crimes and to channel resources towards the therapeutic rehabilitation of the individuals responsible for the offences.

During the latter part of the summer of 1974, the Toronto Transit Commission (T.T.C.) employees were on a 23 day strike, resulting in a total shut-down of bus, street car and subway service for the 2,628,043 inhabitants of Metropolitan Toronto. The public transit strike provides a novel and unique opportunity to systematically evaluate the validity of sexual assault theories by determining if the frequency and nature of sexual assault against females was affected by the T.T.C. strike, which resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of female hitch-hikers within Metropolitan Toronto. Within a distance of only a few blocks, it was not uncommon for a driver during the strike period to observe as many as 20 women hitch-hiking. One Toronto newspaper mounted a campaign to encourage drivers to offer rides to hitch-hikers. During the strike period there was a degree of respectability accorded to the practice of hitch-hiking.

This research effort began in an attempt to systematically assess the validity of current theorizing to account for sexual offences against adult females, and to propose preventative measures based on the findings. There are currently two theories which attempt to explain the occurrence of a sexual offence against an adult female. The first theory purports that the female is totally unresponsible for the offence committed against her. She is the victim of the male offender and has in no way titilated, teased, seduced, or in any other way suggested to the male offender that she was desirous of having sexual contact with him. Support for this theory is found in cases where the sexual offender shows very little aesthetic preference in his choice of a sex partner. It appears that the sex offender simply decides to assault the next female he sees, conditions permitting. The case sited by East [1] may be an example of such behaviour in which an unprepossessing 70 year old woman was raped and then murdered by a man who was not drunk and who exhibited no evidence of mental disorder of psychotic proportions, mental incapacity, or mental subnormality. The above theory suggests that female accessibility is a major factor in sexual assault and would lead to the hypothesis that the number of sexual offences against female hitch-hikers would increase during the strike period since the hitch-hiking female becomes a readily accessible victim. In accordance with the theory that the female victim is not responsible for the sexual assault, it was therefore hypothesized that the number of sexual offences against hitch-hikers would increase during the T.T.C. strike period, while the total number of sexual assaults on females would remain unchanged, since the male offender would merely alter his method of contacting his victim to the more readily accessible female hitch-hiker.

A second theory to explain the occurrence of sexual offences suggests that the female victim deliberately or unconsciously invites the sexual offence by tempting the male offender to commit the offence of which she subsequently complains. Psychodynamic theory explains the invitation to commit a sexual offence in two ways. The hysterically neurotic female may unconsciously provoke the male's sexual response which she consciously rejects. The sadistic woman may deliberately titilate a man with the intention of frustrating him, only to

Footnotes

1. *A modified version of this paper was presented at the 1975 Convention of the Canadian Psychological Association, Quebec city, Quebec, June 20, 1975.*

The author is grateful to the Metropolitan Toronto Police Force and particularly Mr. Harold Adamson, Chief of Police, for providing statistics on the incidence of sexual offences. Mrs. Esther Daniels' assistance was invaluable in the preparation of the manuscript.

2. *Requests for reprints should be sent to Dr. Sheldon H. Geller, Employee Health Services Branch, Macdonald Block, Room M1-73, Parliament Buildings, Toronto, Canada M7A 2C1.*

3. *Personal communications, Mr. Michael E. Chodos, B.A., B.C.L., L.L.B. October 21, 1974.*

4. *A third possible hypothesis to account for the obtained results is that there exists a fixed number of females in Metropolitan Toronto who deliberately initiate sexual contact with males by the most convenient method, such as hitch-hiking during the T.T.C. strike, and then report this contact as a sexual assault. Such an explanation would require that victims of rape and other sexual offences be assaulted frequently, have a specific personality disorder and share many characteristics. A thorough review of the literature found no support for this hypothesis. Victims of sexual offences tend to have no previous record of being sexually assaulted and tend to be a heterogeneous group.*

find that he will not be denied what had, in effect, been promised[2]. Support for the second theory is found in studies on both infra-humans and humans. Harlow[3] has observed the ritual of courtship and mating among monkeys which is characterized by the female stimulating and tantalizing the male, inviting pursuit by running away and resisting mildly before finally submitting. In an early study of sexual assault complaints received by the Detroit Police Department, Dunham[4] found that in half the cases the victim was known to the offender. Amir[5] studied 646 cases of rape reported to the Philadelphia Police Department and concluded that 19% of them were "victim precipitated". The second theory, which suggests that sexual offences against females are actually initiated by the female, would predict that during the T.T.C. strike *both* the total number of sexual offences against females and the number of sexual offences against female hitch-hikers would increase when compared to the pre-strike and post-strike periods. As previously mentioned, hitch-hiking during the strike had been accorded a degree of respectability. The female who may have suppressed or repressed her inhibitions towards consciously or unconsciously inviting a sexual offence would find that during the strike, hitch-hiking afforded her an opportunity to release her inhibitions and thus provoke the male into performing a sexual offence.

Method

The 23 day strike included three weekends and one holiday Monday. In order to obtain a comparable pre-strike period, the 23 day period from Monday, July 15 to Tuesday, August 6, 1974, which also contained three weekends and one holiday Monday, was selected. The post-strike period was 23 days from Monday, September 9, to Tuesday, October 1, 1974, which contained three weekends but no holiday Monday. Therefore the three periods studied in 1974 were as follows:

Pre-Strike period — Monday, July 15 to Tuesday, August 6, 1974, inclusive.

Strike period — Monday, August 12 to Tuesday, September 3, 1974, inclusive.

Post-Strike period — Monday, September 9, to Tuesday, October 1, 1974, inclusive.

It became apparent in designing this study that any differences in the incidence of sexual offences found in the three periods studied in 1974 may be caused by seasonal factors such as vacation periods, weather, unemployment, etc. and not necessarily by the effect that the T.T.C. strike might have upon hitch-hiking. In an effort to determine if seasonal factors affected the incidence of sexual offences against females, the following three 23 day periods in 1973 were selected which contained the same number of workdays, weekends and holidays as the three 1974 periods studied:

Period 1 — Monday, July 16 to Tuesday, August 7, 1973, inclusive.

Period 2 — Monday, August 13 to Tuesday, September 4, 1973, inclusive.

Period 3 — Monday, September 10 to Tuesday, October 2, 1973, inclusive.

The sexual offences against females studied consisted of rape, attempted rape and indecent assault reported to the police in Metropolitan Toronto. Rape is generally defined as the physical fact of penetration of the female without her consent, while attempted rape is defined as the attempted physical penetration of the female without her consent. Indecent assault is considered to be the voluntary and intended application of force with sexual connotations.[3] The Metropolitan Toronto Police supplied both the daily number of sexual offences against adult female hitch-hikers and the daily number of all sexual offences against adult females as defined here for the three periods studied in 1974 and for the three periods studied in 1973.

Results

Table 1 presents the number of sexual offences against hitch-hiking females and against *all* females before, during, and after the T.T.C. strike.

There were significantly ($F = 8.27$, $df = 2/66$, $p < .001$) more sexual offences against female hitch-hikers during the Strike period ($X = 0.39$) than during either the Pre-Strike period ($X = 0.04$, $p < .005$) or the Post-Strike period ($X = 0.00$ $p < .001$). During the Strike period 12.86% of all sexual offences against females were committed against hitch-hikers, as compared to 1.59% during the Pre-Strike period and 0% during the Post-Strike period. The proportion of sexual offences against female hitch-hikers to the *total* number of sexual offences during the Strike period increased by 808.81% ($z = 2.13$, $p < .02$) when compared to the Pre-Strike period, and was greater by more than 1200% ($z = 2.63$, $p < .005$) when compared to the Post-Strike period.

The *total* number of sexual offences against females during the Pre-Strike, Strike, and Post-Strike periods did not differ significantly ($F = 0.96$, $df = 2.66$). When these three periods are combined there were 2.67 sexual offences committed each day against females.

To assess the possibility that seasonal factors may be affecting the above findings, data from 1973 were analyzed. This analysis indicated that the number of sexual offences against female hitch-hikers for the three periods studied in 1973 did not differ significantly ($F = 2.82$, $df = 2/66$) and accounted for 5.53% of all sexual offences.

Discussion

The results of the present study provide the first empirical demonstration that the female victim is not responsible for the sexual offence committed against her. It appears that both the *opportunity* to commit a sexual offence and the *availability* of a female victim are the salient etiological variables that determine the occurrence of a sexual offence.[4] The present results disconfirm the theory that any conscious or unconscious motivation on the part of the female victim may have contributed to the offence.

During the 1974 Toronto Transit Strike the number of sexual offences against female hitch-hikers increased nine times, while the total number of sexual offences against females remained constant. It would appear that there is a relatively constant number of males in Metropolitan Toronto who commit sexual offences against adult females. An increase in the opportunity to commit a sexual offence, such as occurred during the T.T.C. strike, when numerous females hitch-hiked, affects only the particular method by which the sex offender contacts his victim, and does not alter the total number of sexual offences. During the T.T.C. strike many females used hitch-hiking as a means of transportation and the sex offender used this method to contact his victim instead of other means.

During the T.T.C. strike, the proportion of sexual offences against female hitch-hikers increased by eight times as compared to the Pre-Strike and Post-Strike periods in 1974. Seasonal factors were unable to account for this increase, since it was found that during the three periods studied in 1973 the proportion of sexual offences against hitch-hikers remained constant. This suggests that the T.T.C. strike and resulting increase in the number of hitch-hiking females was directly related to the increase in the number of sexual offences against hitch-hikers. It was hypothesized that if the female had either deliberately or unconsciously invited the sexual offence, then the total number of sexual offences would increase during the T.T.C. strike. No support was found for the theory that sexual offences are generally victim-precipitated since the total number of offences was unaffected by the strike.

Prevention of sexual offences

Let us now turn to the issue of reducing or preventing the incidence of sexual offences against adult females. To reduce both the *opportunity* for a male to commit an offence, and the *availability* of a female victim, females should be advised not to hitch-hike or engage in other activities that may place them in isolated situations with unfamiliar males. Educational boards, police departments and various community and social agencies should embark upon campaigns to inform the public of the inherent dangers of female hitch-hiking. Recently, one regional police force in southern Ontario distributed posters and visited elementary and secondary schools to warn students of the dangers involved in hitch-hiking (6).

A second measure designed to reduce the frequency of sexual offences is that of informing females of the characteristics of men who commit sex offences. Such a procedure would allow a female to avoid potential sex offenders, since it has been estimated that almost 30% of the victims of rape previously knew the sex offender (7). The results of the present study suggest that during the T.T.C. strike, the sex offender may have substituted the readily accessible hitch-hiker as his victim instead of a previously known female. The procedure of providing a composite personality profile has been used to pre-select high risk individuals and has recently been effective in selecting potential hijackers before they board airplanes[8]. About two thirds of apprehended rapists are between fifteen and twenty-five years of age and most of the remaining one third

TABLE I

Effect of three time periods in 1974 on the number of sexual offences against females in Metropolitan Toronto

Time Period	Sexual Offence: Number of sexual offences against hitch-hikers		Number of all sexual offences		Percent of all sexual offences against hitch-hikers
Pre-Strike July 15 — Aug. 6	Daily Average	0.04	Daily Average	2.74	1.59%
	Total	1.00	Total	63.00	
Transit Strike Aug. 12 — Sept. 3	Daily Average	0.39	Daily Average	3.04	12.86%
	Total	9.00	Total	70.00	
Post-Strike Sept. 9 — Oct. 1	Daily Average	0.00	Daily Average	2.22	0.00%
	Total	0.00	Total	51.00	

are less than forty-five. Usually the victim and the offender live in the same area and are of the same socio-economic level and race. Significantly more lower class than upper class males are convicted of rape[7]. Almost half the offenders in cases of rape had previous police records[4]. A high proportion of sex offenders were married at the time of their arrest. They tended to be impulsive opportunists who seek immediate self-gratification[9]. The psychopathic or anti-social personalities were found to have a high incidence among rapists[9, 10, 11]. An extensive study by Glueck[12] found that the sex offender was characterized by pathological egocentricity, incapacity for love, general poverty in major affective reactions, unresponsiveness in general interpersonal relations, poor judgment, failure to learn from experience and a tendency to have a trivial, impersonal and poorly integrated sex life. Although the largest percentage of sex offenders were found to be psychopathic, some fell into other areas of psychopathology. Another group of sex offenders have the belief that the female would welcome being assaulted, enjoy the experience and arrange for return visits[9]. Kopp[11] described the sex offender as appearing to fit the description of the passive-aggressive personality. Other researchers have found personality patterns of aggression, impulsiveness, and deluded narcissistic thinking in their study of sex offenders[13]. In manic reactions, schizophrenia and organic psychosis, the lowering of internal controls may at times result in physical assault and occasionally in sexual offences. In some instances, sexual offences may be associated with the excessive use of alcohol and accompanying lowered inhibitions[9].

A third measure recommended to reduce both the frequency and severity of sexual offences is to prepare the female for an encounter with a sex offender, should she be assaulted, by making her aware of the common elements in most sexual offences. Selken[14] has delineated four stages involved in rape. First, the sex offender seeks out a woman who is vulnerable to attack. This involves an environment where the victim is isolated and where there is little chance of interruption. Second, the sex offender then tests the woman to determine if she can be intimidated. This often involves asking the female for street directions, a cigarette light, or by making a suggestive comment. The female's first line of defence is not to allow herself to be intimidated or to express fear. She should remain aloof and unfriendly. The third phase of rape involves the sex offender telling his victim that he will kill her if she fails to co-operate and that he will not harm her if she does. Defence counsel for accused rapists often imply that the female victim consented because "it is impossible to put a pencil through a moving doughnut". Such logic is fallacious because the victim of rape has been intimidated into a state of immobility by threats to her life if she does not co-operate. The fourth and final stage of rape is the sexual transaction itself. Selkin found that vaginal intercourse accounted for less than half of the victims he studied with anal or oral intercourse being more common.

The fourth measure recommended to reduce the severity and frequency of sexual offences consists of the female assuming an active role in her defence. The making of loud noises (e.g. screaming, knocking over garbage cans) can be an effective deterrent in some instances. Individuals who advocate the physical defence techniques suggest that even when physically assaulted, the female should resist by screaming and fighting back in order to prevent sexual assault from becoming rape. As previously noted, the sex offender attempts to intimidate his victim into a state of immobility and co-operation. If a female feels confident in using one of the various arts of self-defence, she is less likely to be intimidated by a sex offender while at the same time being more able to defend herself against any physical assault.

A fifth and novel method designed to prevent sexual offences is advocated by Storaska[15]. He suggests that females comply initially with the requests of the offender, in order to gain his confidence, until they have a chance to safely escape. This method requires that women use femine wiles to outwit the sex offender and has come under strong criticism from rape crisis centres and many feminist groups.

Conclusion

The results of the present study disconfirm the theory that sexual offences are victim initiated. It appears that the male sex offender simply decides to assault the next female he sees, conditions permitting. Based on the findings of this study and other research reports, five preventative measures designed to reduce the incidence of female sexual assault were proposed.

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